

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCE COMMITTEE'S  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS  
GROTON, CONNECTICUT  
MONDAY, JUNE 27, 2005**

**THOMAS R. BAPTIST  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
AUDUBON CONNECTICUT**

**IN SUPPORT OF H.R 307 - THE LONG ISLAND STEWARDSHIP ACT OF 2005**

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Thomas R. Baptist and I am Executive Director of Audubon Connecticut, an operating unit of the National Audubon Society. Thank you for traveling here to Connecticut and giving us the opportunity to testify *in strong support* of H.R. 307, the Long Island Stewardship Act of 2005. This Act will create a voluntary, science-based program to identify and protect important recreational, open space and ecological sites around the Sound, and would provide \$25 million in new funding to help achieve the conservation goals of the program. Audubon *strongly supports* this legislation.

Before beginning my formal testimony, I would like to take a moment to thank Chairman Gilchrist, on behalf of Audubon, for his support of bird conservation through the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Neotropical Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge System, and the restoration of Chesapeake Bay. Mr. Chairman, we are fortunate to have the benefit of your leadership in this effort to protect Long Island Sound.

I would also like to thank the co-chairs of the Congressional Long Island Sound Caucus, Representatives Rob Simmons and Steve Israel, along with all the other members of our Connecticut and New York delegations without whom we would not be here today.

**The Long Island Sound Restoration Act protects water quality**

H.R. 307 contains a provision that will re-authorize The Long Island Sound Restoration Act of 2000. The Restoration Act provides vital funding for sewage treatment plant upgrades in both Connecticut and New York, and for the operation of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Long Island Sound. The Restoration Act authorizes \$40 million per year toward this effort; annual appropriations, however, have ranged from \$5-7 million. The funds provided through this Act are critical to continued water quality improvements and to meeting the goal of a 58.5% reduction in the total enriched nitrogen load to the Sound from both point and nonpoint

sources by 2014, committed to by EPA Region I and II, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) in the LIS Agreement of 2003.

### **H.R. 307 will protect the Sound's living shoreline**

When early explorers entered Long Island Sound, they encountered an unbelievably rich ecosystem teeming with birds, fish and wildlife. Today, the viability of this ecosystem hangs in the balance. Intense development pressure, recreational demands, and various commercial and industrial enterprises are taking a heavy toll on Long Island Sound. Never before has the Sound been at the center of so many issues - - dwindling shellfish populations, continuing pollution by sewage treatment plant discharges, contaminated stormwater runoff, increasing pressure for industrial/commercial use, and accelerated shoreline development.

Despite these challenges, we have made significant progress toward restoring and protecting the Sound, especially with regard to water quality and reduced nitrogen loading. At the same time, development-related activities along the coast are proceeding at an alarming rate, destroying or degrading coastal and estuarine habitat, and blocking public access to key recreational areas. Just as we have focused on protecting the Sound's water quality, we must now focus on protecting the Sound's living shoreline through the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act.

### **H.R. 307 will impact millions of citizens**

The mission of Audubon Connecticut is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems focusing on birds, other wildlife and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity. Audubon Connecticut has nearly 30 employees statewide who use science, education, conservation and advocacy to accomplish this goal. Through our network of nature centers and sanctuaries, we reach out to Connecticut citizens of all ages and all walks of life. Our twelve (12) Chapters provide grassroots support and programs unique to each area of the state.

Audubon Connecticut is also dedicated to connecting people with nature, and Long Island Sound is one of the most important places in the United States for this endeavor. Approximately 10% of our nation's population (28 million people) lives within 50 miles of Long Island Sound. When we talk about providing people with a direct opportunity to experience and appreciate the natural world, Long Island Sound is a place that touches millions of lives.

### **Audubon has worked to support Long Island Sound**

Audubon has a long history of advocacy in support of Long Island Sound. My colleague, David Miller, Executive Director of Audubon New York will be discussing this history in detail, and will outline Audubon's involvement in the Listen to the Sound Campaigns of 1990 and 2000, and the Stewardship Initiative. David has been a prime mover in these efforts so it is truly his story to tell.

Audubon Connecticut was founded in 1998, though the National Audubon Society has had Chapters and Centers in Connecticut since the 1940's, and has consistently participated in Sound-related advocacy. Three years ago, we officially joined the Long Island Sound Study's (LISS) Citizen's Advisory Committee and the LISS's Stewardship Initiative Working Group.

During this time, our staff has traveled to Washington, D.C. to advocate on behalf of funding for the Long Island Sound Restoration Act and for the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act. This past fall, Audubon Connecticut, Audubon New York and Audubon's National Policy Office in D.C. joined together in a joint campaign focused on improving water quality and wildlife habitat in the Sound. Along with the Stewardship Work Group, we have just completed a series of six (6) public forums on the Stewardship Initiative, three (3) in Connecticut and three in New York. Audubon Connecticut also advocates for Sound-related initiatives at the State General Assembly.

### **What is the Long Island Sound Stewardship Initiative**

The Long Island Sound Stewardship Act is a proactive conservation to conservation that seeks to restore or maintain the integrity of key sites. The Act calls for systematic selection of sites based on objective criteria within a designated boundary around the Sound. It creates an Advisory Council composed of representative stakeholders that will work to identify, enhance, and protect sites with open space, recreational, or ecological significance within the Sound ecosystem and Stewardship boundary. The Council, under the direction of the EPA Long Island Sound Office, will evaluate proposals for stewardship actions, award grants to support those actions on a 3:1 federal to state match, link stakeholders with technical assistance, and issue annual reports on programs and accomplishments. Participation in the program is voluntary. It carries no regulatory power and creates neither liability nor the requirement for public access. The proposed legislation calls for an authorization of \$25 million per year from 2006 to 2013.

There are many parallels between the proposed Stewardship Initiative and Audubon's Important Bird Area Program (IBA), which targets avian species. The remainder of my testimony will discuss what Audubon Connecticut is doing through its IBA program to restore Long Island Sound and promote stewardship of key coastal areas. This program offers an excellent model for on-the-ground stewardship actions that could take place on a Sound-wide scale with passage H.R. 307.

### **Audubon's Important Bird Area Program: A model for stewardship**

Audubon focuses on birds as an indicator species that signal the overall health of our environment. Like the proverbial canary in the coalmine, declines in bird populations are often early warning signals of threats to other species, including people.

Audubon's Important Bird Area Program (IBA) is a global effort to identify areas that are most important for maintaining bird populations, and to focus conservation efforts where they will have the greatest impact. The program recognizes that habitat loss and fragmentation are the most serious threats facing populations of birds across America and around the world. By working through partnerships to identify those places that are critical to birds during some part of their life cycle (breeding, wintering, feeding, migrating), Audubon works to minimize the effects that habitat loss and degradation can have on bird populations. The IBA Program is a proactive approach to conservation that seeks to identify threats and address them before they threaten the integrity of key sites. Unless we can slow the rapid destruction and degradation of habitat, the populations of many birds could decline to dangerously low levels.

Estuarine habitats are extremely important in Connecticut, making it particularly important to identify, protect, restore and manage the key habitat areas in proximity to Long Island Sound. In ranking the relative importance of the various habitat types in Connecticut, Audubon found that estuarine habitats are the most important habitat type in the state, both from the perspective of providing habitat for species that are locally rare, and for those species for which Connecticut provides habitat for a significant share of the global or continental population.

### **H.R. 307 will identify priority sites for inclusion in the Stewardship Initiative**

Just as H.R. 307 calls for the identification of priority stewardship sites, Audubon has already recognized 30 Important Bird Areas in the Long Island Sound Study Area. These sites are listed below:

#### *Important Bird Areas in Connecticut (from west to east)*

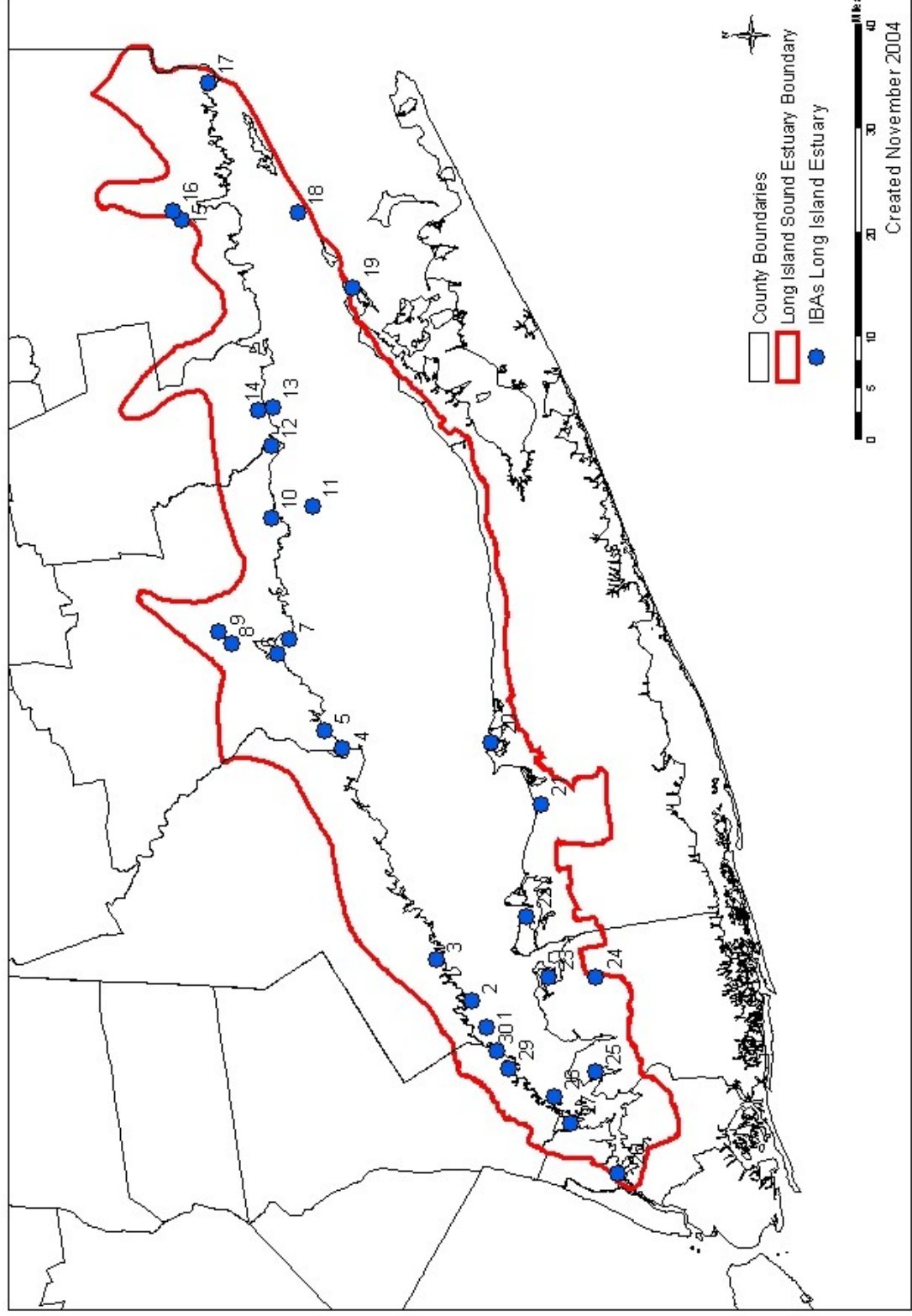
1. Great Captain's Island, Greenwich
2. Greenwich Point Park and nearby islands, Greenwich
3. Cove Island Park, Stamford
4. Milford Point/Wheeler Marsh/Mouth of the Housatonic River, Milford
5. Charles Island and Silver Sands State Park, Milford
6. Sandy Point, West Haven
7. Lighthouse Point Park, New Haven
8. East Rock Park, New Haven
9. Quinnipiac River Tidal Marsh, North Haven, New Haven, Hamden
10. East River Marsh Complex, Guilford
11. Falkner Island unit of Stewart B. McKinney NWR, offshore of Guilford
12. Hammonasset Beach State Park, Madison
13. Menunketesuck and Duck Islands and surrounding tidal flats, Westbrook
14. Salt Meadow Unit of Stewart B. McKinney NWR, Westbrook.
15. Connecticut College Arboretum, Waterford and New London
16. Mamacoke Island and adjacent coves, Waterford
17. Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, Stonington

#### *Important Bird Areas in New York (from east to west)*

18. Great Gull Island, Southold
19. Orient Point and Plum Island, Southold
20. Crane Neck to Misery Point, Brookhaven
21. Nissequogue River Watershed/Smithtown Bay, Smithtown
22. Huntington and Northport Bays, Huntington, Northport
23. Oyster Bay Area, Oyster Bay
24. Muttontown Preserve, Hempstead
25. Little Neck Bay to Hempstead Harbor, North Hempstead
26. North Brother/South Brother Islands, New York City
27. Pelham Bay Park, New York City
28. Huckleberry Island, New York City
29. Marshlands Conservancy, Rye
30. Edith G. Read Wildlife Sanctuary, Rye

With the passage of H.R. 307, Audubon plans to work actively with landowners and other stakeholders to seek Stewardship recognition for these sites.

## Important Bird Areas identified within the Long Island Sound Estuary



## **H.R. 307 includes conservation planning**

Conservation plans are a critical component of the IBA program, providing Audubon, landowners, land managers and other stakeholders with a strategic approach for future conservation and habitat management activities. This strategic and science-based approach allows for a much more effective use of resources, ensuring that IBAs will continue to support birds not only for our generation, but for many generations to come.

Conservation planning is also an important opportunity to engage partners. Informed landowners, stakeholders and citizens are the best way to ensure that IBAs or Long Island Sound Stewardship sites remain special places. H.R. 307 will support a similar program of conservation planning for critical ecological and recreational sites around the Sound.

Though Audubon's first five IBA conservation plans are just now nearing completion, the process of identifying these sites as Important Bird Areas and launching the planning process - - similar to the process that the Long Island Sound Study's Stewardship Initiative has just completed - - has already led to interesting synergies that have attracted significant funding and resources to the sites, leading to on-the-ground improvements, and leveraging the relatively small investment that Audubon has made at each site.

## **IBA: A model for Long Island Sound Stewardship**

Audubon Connecticut now has several years of experience implementing its IBA program on the ground. The following three examples illustrate the strong partnerships and successful conservation outcomes that can stem from a program like the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act, H.R. 307.

### **(1) Public-Private Partnership for Research at Great Captains Island, Greenwich**

Great Captains Island, owned by the Town of Greenwich, is Connecticut's largest heron and egret rookery and an Audubon IBA. Recognizing the importance of this site, Audubon Connecticut sought and received funding to complete a three-year research project from a variety of sources, including private and municipal funders. Audubon's three-year study, completed in 2002, provided important information about the habitats of the rookery, the foraging areas utilized by the birds nesting on the island, the productivity and behavior of the nesting birds and the threats to the colony posed by predators and other factors. Audubon is partnering with the Town to develop effective conservation strategies for this important habitat based on the final report and its recommendations.

### **(2) Corporate Stewardship Revitalizes Cove Island Park and Holly Pond, Stamford**

The announcement of city-owned Cove Island Park in Stamford as an IBA has attracted corporate and state funding and the support of 100's of volunteers to improve habitats for birds and wildlife viewing opportunities for the public. Construction of a nature trail at the Cove Island Park revitalized a neglected woodland section of this City-owned park, improved public access. This project was completed using funds from the General Electric (GE) Foundation and utilized staff from all three of Audubon's Connecticut Centers, as well as approximately 75 GE Elfun

Volunteers. In May 2003, Audubon employees and volunteers created a half-mile long nature trail, lined with wood-chips, constructed a bridge, and planted 120 specimens of more than 20 species of native trees and shrubs. The tree and shrub species were selected for their high value to birds and other wildlife and included, pagoda dogwood, white oaks, spicebush, viburnums and summersweet clethra.

A month later, Audubon Connecticut, along with GE Elfun Volunteers, staff from SoundWaters and the Norwalk Maritime Aquarium used the diverse habitats of Cove Island Park to teach the 500 students of the KT Murphy Elementary School important lessons about science and nature on a full-day field trip to the Cove Island Park IBA.

The success of this partnership garnered a \$20,000 grant given to the National Audubon Society by the General Electric Foundation to support additional habitat improvements and development of a conservation plan for the park.

In September 2003, Audubon, the GE Foundation, GE Elfun Volunteers, and the City of Stamford, held a second volunteer day to improve the habitats of Cove Island Park IBA, as part of the GE Elfun Volunteers Global Conference. More than 100 GE Elfun Volunteers installed a bird and butterfly garden and other plantings, improved the nature trail and installed nesting boxes to attract Purple Martins, Eastern Screech Owls, Barn Owls and American Kestrels to the park. The garden, consisting of 38 species of native plants, specifically chosen for their value to birds and butterflies, will greatly improve the habitat for migrating birds at Cove Island Park which serves as a critical stopover site for migrants on their long and perilous journeys.

The State of Connecticut has now stepped up to the plate with a \$400,000 grant to the City of Stamford to restore an old brush dump at Cove Island Park, transforming the area into a bird sanctuary and bird viewing area. Audubon is working with the City, neighbors and other stakeholders in the planning this proposed sanctuary.

Audubon Connecticut is currently working with partners to complete an IBA conservation plan for Cove Island Park. A first draft has been reviewed by the City and Audubon, and is currently being revised into a discussion draft for review by key partners and experts on urban migratory stopover habitat.

### **(3) Federal and State Partners Grow Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, Stonington**

The state-owned Barn Island Wildlife Management Area is a globally-important Audubon IBA site. That area now encompasses 1,013 acres, constituting the state's largest protected coastal area, thanks to the partnership among Audubon, the Connecticut DEP, other conservation partners, and the support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A 144-acre private parcel adjacent to the Wildlife Management Area, composed of 36 acres of tidal wetlands, 108 acres of coastal forests, 4 large vernal pools, and inland wetlands, was slated for development into an 18-hole golf course. With support from Audubon, the DEP received a \$1,000,000 grant from the US Fish and Wildlife Service to protect this parcel. Audubon helped to review the grant application and provided information on the importance of the area for birds. Audubon also helped to bring in several additional cooperating partners for the proposal. These partners ensured the protection of the areas significant biological diversity and wildlife habitat. Their work also serves to prevent pollutant loading downstream, and to increase coastal recreational opportunities for the public. The

Connecticut DEP and other conservation partners, including Audubon, were presented with the national 2004 Coastal America Partnership Award on September 10, 2004, in recognition of past and ongoing partnerships for the acquisition and restoration of habitat and research at Barn Island Wildlife Management Area.

### **H.R. 307 will create healthy ecosystems with positive economic impacts**

You will hear from many of us today about the almost \$6 billion dollars that Long Island Sound contributes to the regional economy each year. I would like to touch on one part of that contribution: the revenue that comes from wildlife-related activities, including birding. Birding is reportedly the fastest growing outdoor activity in the nation. Approximately 25% of Connecticut residents participate in bird watching – 3% higher than the national average.<sup>1</sup> In Connecticut, that translates into big dollars and big business. In 2001 alone, the most recent year for which we have data, wildlife watching and eco-tourism brought in an estimated:

- . \$406.2 million in statewide economic impact
- . 4,300 jobs statewide
- . \$33.6 million in taxes for the state and federal government<sup>2</sup>

Habitat and recreational access improvements provided by the passage of H.R. 307 will add to that revenue.

### **Conclusion**

Long Island Sound is our state's premier natural resource and Audubon Connecticut is pleased to offer our *strong support* for H.R. 307. The Sound is also a resource of national significance on a par with the Everglades, Great Lakes, Upper Mississippi, San Francisco Bay, and Chesapeake Bay. What happens in and around the Sound touches the lives of all Connecticut and New York residents, our quality of life and our economic well-being.

H.R. 307, the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act, builds on 20 years of successful, voluntary public-private partnerships in restoring, maintaining and protecting this important estuary. The Stewardship Act will provide a vital companion to the Long Island Sound Restoration Act of 2000. These Acts work in concert to protect both water quality and coastal lands - - two key areas where improvements will result in the most significant benefits to people, birds, marine organisms, and other wildlife, as well as to our economy. Audubon's experience with the IBA program shows that the approach envisioned by the Long Island Sound Stewardship Act, H.R. 307, WILL work.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have. My thanks to you and the members of the Subcommittee for your leadership on this issue, and for the opportunity to testify before you.

*Audubon Connecticut, an operating unit of the National Audubon Society with more than 10,000 members in the state, works to protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats using science, education, conservation, and advocacy.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis, USFWS Report 2001-2

<sup>2</sup> 2001 National and State Economic Impacts of Wildlife Watching, USFWS Report 2001-2;